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HITLER EXILES AND AMERICAN
VISUAL CULTURE

EDITED BY

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CHAPTER NINE

HANS RICHTER IN EXILE:
TRANSLATING THE AVANT-GARDE

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palgrave
macmillan

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*Driven out of my country, now I must see how to find a new store, a bar, where I
can sell what I think.*

—Bertolt Brecht, “Sonnett in der Emigration”

I

A large number of European abstract films premiered in the United States in a 1940 festival at the Museum of Modern Art in New York. The program featured, along with the work of Man Ray, Fernand Léger, and Marcel Duchamp, one of the earliest abstract films, Hans Richter's 1921 study, *Rhythmus 21*. At the time, Richter was head of film production at the Frobenius Film Studios in Basel, Switzerland. But Swiss officials had just announced their intention to deport him back to Germany. Richter, one step ahead of the Swiss, had filed with the U.S. consulate for immigration papers, and was awaiting his official documents. MoMA's screening therefore provided a timely introduction of the artist's work into the New York art scene. Less than a year later, in 1941, Richter immigrated to the United States and took up residence in Manhattan where he would continue to reside on a part-time basis until his death in 1976. Although identified as a German artist, for the past quarter of a century before he arrived in the United States, Richter had a peripatetic lifestyle and he counted Zurich, Munich, Berlin, Moscow, Eindhoven, Basel, and Paris, amongst other cities, as his residences. Thus, to varying degrees, one might be tempted to conclude that most of Richter's life was spent in exile. However, the term exile, as Hamid Naficy reminds us, is traditionally taken to mean “banishment for a particular offense, with a prohibition to return,”¹ and many of

Richter's earlier departures were voluntary and he always returned to Germany. Further, it is important to stress that the condition of exile is more than a physically lived reality and can be both internal and external. More than temporarily moving to a new setting, it bespeaks an attitude, a state of mind, a condition of desire, and it is accompanied by a yearning for a return to the place that has been left behind, and a feeling of displacement in the new environment. Exiles often "memorialize the homeland by fetishizing it in the forms of cathected sounds, images, and chronotopes that are circulated intertextually."² In examining Richter's life course, it is evident that although he did to a certain extent experience the condition of being an external exile during his early years, for reasons that will become clear, that physical state was not paralleled by a corresponding psychological and interior one until he immigrated to North America. And, I argue, this convergence of exterior and interior states of exile profoundly effects his filmic production: both formally and thematically.

Whereas the psychological condition of internal exile certainly marks Richter's life in the United States, it is not evident during the first half of his career. This is in part due to his political allegiance to the historical avant-garde and its disavowal of national identity and patriotism in favor of a broader internationalism. Often for the external exile there is a longing for an abandoned "homeland" (Heimat) that has a distinct geographical location, and internal exiles yearn or exhibit nostalgia for a condition of being, an abstract philosophical mindset rather than a concrete or material territory. Thus, while in Europe, Richter was less of an exile (internal or external) since he was still part of a community that transcended national borders and that existed regardless of where he was located: be it Berlin, Moscow, or Zurich. His allegiance was not to a national identity constructed as "German" but rather to a specific group of avant-garde artists whose own geographical and national identifications were certainly as labile and fluid as Richter's. In his moves to France, the Soviet Union, and Switzerland, Richter was operating within a comfortable and well-known network of like-minded European cultural workers. By contrast, his departure for New York constituted a departure into the unknown and was immediately characterized by a form of exilic anxiety. Furthermore, his leave from the continent, due to Hitler's successes, was marked by a sense of finality that had been absent in his previous moves. As he remarked in retrospect, "When I left Lisbon, on the eve of my fifty-third birthday, I felt sure I would never see Europe again. My heart felt heavy, looking at the vanishing lines of Portugal; it was no lighter when I landed in New York, the city terrified me—Sodom and Gomorrah."³ More than just an ocean was crossed by Richter's journeying to New York. The implications of the continental shift from Europe to North America had profound implications for

Richter's type of artistic practice. For although fascist Europe was certainly the explicit enemy, in terms of filmic production, the thoroughly commodified entertainment culture of the United States also represented an implicit threat to avant-garde work. Unlike in Europe, North America did not have a highly developed experimental cinematographic practice. During the 1930s and early 1940s, Hollywood was in its "Golden Age," leaving little space for alternative modes of production and reception. Indeed, such narrative filmmaking as epitomized by big studio productions, was precisely what Richter was committed to combating with his cinematic activities. Already in a short essay "Film—A Ware" of 1931 he had argued vehemently against the complete transformation by the capitalist film industry of films into manufactured goods or wares without any redeeming qualities.⁴ Film is produced according to the same principles as boots, stamped out to conform to set models and sizes with little or no variations. Further, he proclaimed, the film industry is controlled by monopolies operating on similar principles as those of oil or steel,⁵ which led Richter to conclude that these contributing factors make it almost impossible to conceive of an "art film."

Of course the condition that Richter is describing finds its hyperbolic realization in the United States thus explaining in part his profound dismay at finding himself en route into the belly of the beast, as it were. Unlike other immigrants such as Oskar Fischinger who migrated to the West Coast and tried to integrate themselves into the industry, Richter had always been adamant about maintaining a degree of autonomy and not compromising his artistic ideals by working for and producing mainstream cinema.⁶ Thus, Richter's immigration to New York constituted more than a condition of external exile marked by geographical displacement, linguistic and cultural alienation; it was also characterized by a deep internal exile produced in the confrontation with a system of audiovisual production and a conception of art that was radically at odds with everything that Richter had been striving to achieve previously. Richter was heavily invested in the historical avant-garde until 1930, after which time there is a gap or interruption that is figured both temporally and spatially. From Richter's *Alles dreht sich, Alles bewegt sich* (Everything Revolves, Everything Moves) of 1929, to his next production, *Dreams That Money Can Buy* of 1947, there is a break of eighteen years, and a geographical dislocation of 4,000 miles (figure 9.1). And the cultural project that began for Richter with Dada in Zurich in 1916 during World War I is only resumed thirty years later in New York City in the aftermath of the Second World War. In this chapter, I will examine how Richter's move to the United States can be viewed as a significant rupture in his career and correspondingly enacted a profound transformation on his filmic theory and production.

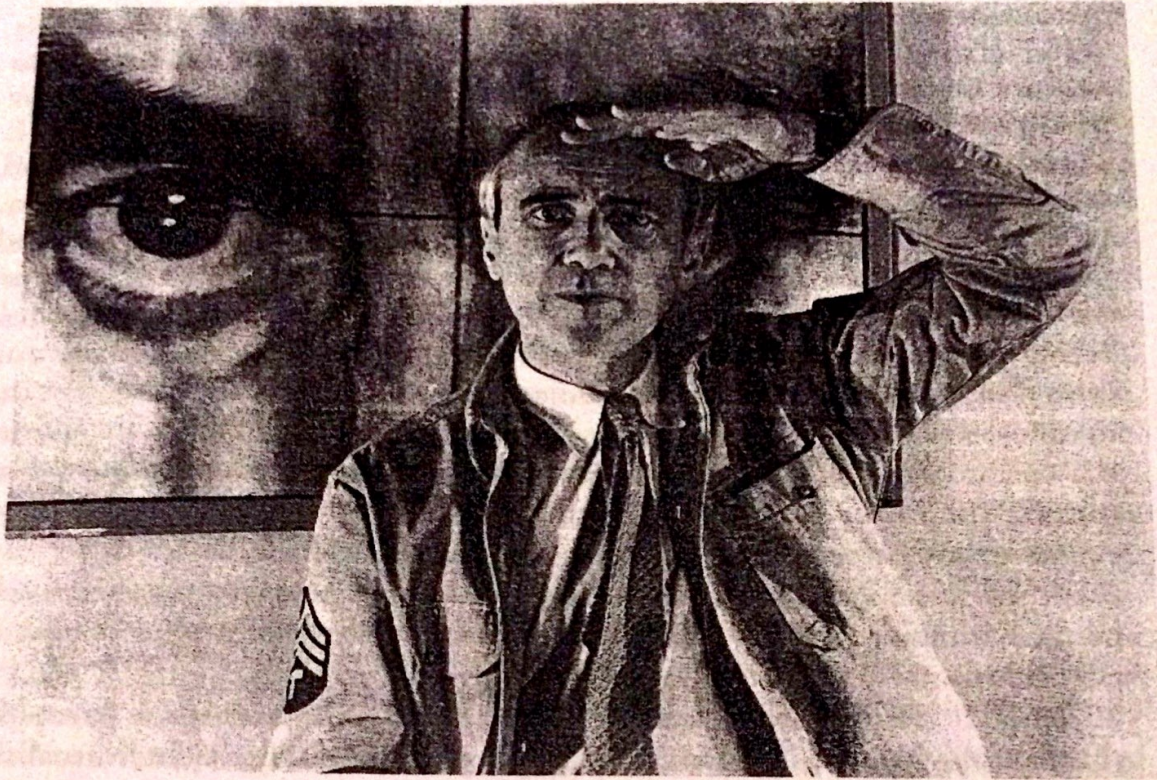


Figure 9.1 Hans Richter in *Dreams that Money Can Buy* (1947). Courtesy of Filmmuseum Berlin—Deutsche Kinemathek.

II

Richter was one of the key players in German Dada. He worked closely with other central figures in this movement, including Richard Huelsenbeck, Kurt Schwitters, Hans Arp, Viking Eggeling, Tristan Tzara, Marcel Duchamp, and Sophie Taeuber. As early as 1913, he became acquainted with two modernist avant-garde movements that challenged prevailing notions of art: the Dresden-based *Die Brücke*, and the Munich-based *Der Blaue Reiter*. Both were comprised primarily of painters who sought to push beyond figuration and representation toward abstraction. The following year he joined an expressionist group centered around the journal *Die Aktion*, which featured his work. Richter enlisted in World War I in 1915, but was soon seriously wounded, and while on medical leave in 1916 he traveled to Zurich where he became involved in the formation of Dadaism.

Richter returned to Germany at the end of the war and played an active part in the left-wing revolutionary politics raging in Munich and Berlin. Drawing on connections made while in Zurich, he figured prominently in

the historical avant-garde of the immediate postwar period, and participated in the Congress for International Progressive Artists in 1922 as well as in the Constructivist International of the same year. Moreover, whereas he had worked primarily as a painter and engraver until the end of World War I, his association with constructivist filmmakers—Sergei Eisenstein and especially Viking Eggeling—pushed him toward the filmic medium. Beginning in the 1920s he began to make films, and in 1926 he founded the Gesellschaft für Neuen Film with Karl Freund and Guido Bagier in order to promote experimental film, and in 1929 he wrote his first book *Filmgegner von heute—Filmfreunde von morgen* (Film Enemies Today and Film Friends Tomorrow). Both projects sought to alter significantly the manner in which films were produced and received, and to move away from the narrative feature film structure. During the early 1930s, Richter found himself increasingly under censorship and attack—intellectually, institutionally, and even physically—leading to his relocation to Basel and subsequent emigration from Europe in 1941. Once in New York, he became director of City College's Institute of Film Technique, a post he would hold until he retired in 1957.

In 1920 Richter collaborated with Eggeling to produce a pamphlet, "Universelle Sprache" (Universal Language), in which, Richter recalls in 1965, they tried to elaborate the thesis "that the abstract form offers the possibility of a language above and beyond national frontiers."⁷ As is evident, an art that is based on national or cultural identification should be avoided in favor of productions that achieve transcendent or nonculturally specific communication. He continues that "the basis for such a language would lie in the identical form of perception in all human beings and would offer the promise of a universal art as it had never existed before. With careful analysis of the elements, one should be able to rebuild men's vision into a spiritual language in which the simplest as well as the most complicated, emotions as well as thoughts, objects as well as ideas, would find a form."⁸ The following year, in 1921, Richter made his first film, *Rhythmus 21*. The latter is a black-and-white study of suprematist squares and rectangles that change in size and depth through a series of rhythmic evolutions. ("Twenty-one" merely refers to the year it was made.)

Rhythmus 21 was followed by three subsequent abstract studies: *Rhythmus 23* (1923), *Rhythmus 25* (1925), and *Fuge in Rot und Grün* (Fugue in Red and Green, 1923). In the latter two works, Richter hand-painted colors in the geometrical shapes directly on the celluloid, thereby adding yet one more dimension to his light and motion explorations. The role of varying intensities and registers of light in producing an image were crucial in Richter's filmic constructions. As he had theorized already in 1923, "The space is neither architectonic nor graphic, rather it is

time-based. That is to say that light constructs through changes in quality and quantity (light, dark, color) a lightspace, that is created not through volume but is rather a space composed out of the progression of planes, lines, and points."⁹ Thus the overriding structure of these productions was determined more by the motion of the filmed objects in time and space rather than by any physical or referential materiality. As Richter said on more than one occasion in the early years of his film career, "The only reality you have in the movie theater is the screen." In addition, Richter further experimented with the possibility of adding sound, and while the structure of *Rhythmus 21* was relatively random, *Rhythmus 23*, *25*, and *Fugue in Red and Green* set into motion a complex interplay of forms arranged according to the musical composition of a fugue in which several motifs of the polyphonic composition are repeated voices and parts that enter and exit in succession.¹⁰

At this stage in his filmic career, Richter was concentrating on seeing just how far he could develop or translate the abstract form into celluloid. In sharp contrast to the developmental leaps in narrative film during the 1920s, Richter pushes in the opposite direction completely away from diegesis and mimetic representation. As he stresses, "[T]he abstract form offers film unusual possibilities because: 1) it allows for the possibility that the artistic expression can be realized free of all associations and coincidences, 2) nonrepresentational, abstract 'signs' are, for us, the most persuasive and strongest means for expression."¹¹ However, despite Richter's commitment to abstract form one can detect a gradual evolution of his films into more representational forms and finally into sociocritical shorts in the late 1920s and early 1930s. Interestingly, whereas Richter's painting moves from representation to abstraction, the opposite movement takes places cinematically. From his first writings about film, it is clear that one question remained central to Richter: "What social purpose does cinema serve?" For only if one continuously poses such a question can cinema's "artistic development as a whole and the development of each individual sector in every one of its forms" be properly understood.¹² Richter considered film to be an art form, with the more prevalent narrative cinema representing a continuation of nineteenth-century realist art. His early cinematic experimentations sought to translate avant-garde painting directly into the medium of film. Hence the purely abstract nature of his rhythm films, and especially his use of the form of the suprematist square in *Rhythmus 21*. However, Richter soon realized that "abstract form in films does not mean the same as in painting where it is the ultimate expression of a long tradition of thousands and thousands of years. Film has to be discovered in its own property."¹³ It was this attentiveness to the specificity of the filmic medium that led Richter to dramatically alter his filmic style in favor of representational

forms and human figures such as one finds beginning with his 1928 *Filmstudie* (Film Study).

Filmstudie is a transitional work that opens with a medley of geometrical shapes including circles and spheres that gradually metamorphize into free floating eyeballs and finally a face. What follows is an interplay between abstract forms and representational ones appearing at rhythmic intervals creating a complex medley. Any thematic link is impossible to discern and the impetus behind the images is rather one of a confluence and representation of forms than one of content. Representational images thus function in the same manner as the abstract shapes of his earlier studies. *Filmstudie* was followed by the surrealist and highly experimental *Vormittagsspuk* (Ghosts Before Breakfast) of 1927, in which Richter mobilized what at the time were very sophisticated camera tricks in order to produce a spectacular film filled with amazing stunts in the tradition of Georges Melies. Although heralded for its formal properly cinematographic properties and despite its playful nature and seemingly disassociated series of images, *Ghost Before Breakfast* also was read retrospectively as containing a critical message that alluded to the rise of fascism. For example, the opening shot of a clock about to strike midnight was seen as indicating that Germany was in its "eleventh hour" and the final shots of the image of a rotating revolver was viewed auspiciously as pointing toward a bleak future. In the next few years Richter's filmmaking practice continued to move away from abstraction and he produced more overtly sociocritical shorts such as *Inflation* (1928), *Rennsymphonie* (Race Symphony, 1928–1929), *Zweigroschenzauber* (Two Pence A Commercial Picture in Rhymes, 1928–1929), and the 1929 *Everything Revolves, Everything Moves*—the latter that led to Richter being labeled a "Kulturbolschewist."

Yet it should be stressed that even though Richter moves away from abstract geometrical forms in the 1920s, the fundamental driving force is still not one based on narrative, but on rhythm and movement. The function of the human figures is not significantly different from that of the earlier geometric forms. An anecdote that Richter liked to recall is highly revealing in this context. The anecdote is about a Jewish acquaintance of Richter's who immigrated to Palestine and set up a movie theater where he always projected the same film. One day the reels were mixed up and much to his surprise he noticed that it did not affect the appeal of the film since the spectators were not as much interested in the plot as in the spectacle of a "world in motion."¹⁴ A basic fascination with moving images therefore precedes sophisticated plot developments and Richter concentrated his efforts in utilizing movement to achieve the maximum impact on the audience.¹⁵ Not only is the effect of motion achieved through plays with light and rhythm but it is enhanced by what Richter termed "visual rhyming."

The concept of visual rhyming is fully developed in his *Zweigroschenzauber* (Two Pence: A Commercial in Picture Rhymes, 1928). For instance, when an image of a moon dissolves into a man's bald head that then turns into mirror reflection of a human figure, or when the legs of an infant kicking are immediately followed by the legs of bicyclists pedaling, the result is akin to a visual rhyme.

And yet, as indicated earlier these later films produced in the late 1920s are not as playful as they appear to be. Indeed, Richter's works increasingly are imbued with elements of critique that reside not merely in formal properties but also in the choice of images and representations thereby corresponding to the ever-growing atmosphere of political crisis in which the artist found himself. As the pressure increased, so did Richter's probing into the ontological nature of film and his attempt to conceive of a different type of cinema that was neither distracting narrative, nor documentary, nor purely abstract. Thus, in 1929 he observes that "[t]he path of theatre-freed film follows two directions: one in the pursuit of so-called unstaged shots, which are the technical basis of weekly recordings of reality, the main proponent and director of this type of cinema is Dsiga Werthoff [*sic*]; the other type of film is that without plot, theme or narrative—the so-called 'absolute film.'"¹⁶ Although both of these paths—documentary and abstract—provided viable alternatives to dominant narrative cinema, Richter still found both of them inadequate. By the time he left Germany for Switzerland in the early 1930s, having witnessed both the death of the avant-garde (in some cases literally) as well as the complete co-option of commodification of feature film, he was committed to advancing a new mode of filmic production, one that would somehow constitute a fusing of art and entertainment film.¹⁷

III

Richter's first decade of filmmaking prior to his exile in the United States can be divided into two distinct styles: abstract films, which include the *Rhythm* trilogy and *Fugue in Red and Green*; and experimental shorts including *Ghosts Before Breakfast* and *Inflation*. The impact of all these early works on avant-garde filmmakers and artists cannot be underestimated. Already in 1929 after a trip to Germany Kasimir Malevich composed a script storybook on Richter after viewing his films, and a future generation of filmmakers such as Stan Brakhage, Kenneth Anger, Michael Snow, Peter Kubelka, Jonas Mekas, and Maya Deren freely acknowledged the importance of Richter for their development.¹⁸ Histories and anthologies on art film still consider these abstract and avant-garde productions as seminal to the development of experimental film.¹⁹ Indeed, testifying to the

importance and success of this early work was the fact that during the 1960s the influential contemporary art journal *Aspen* distributed copies of *Rhythm 21* in one of its box-set editions along with films by Robert Rauschenberg and Laszlo Moholy-Nagy.

However, beginning with Richter's exile a new period emerges and his filmic oeuvre reveals a third genre: what I call his history or essay films. These include three films made during the postwar period while he was in the United States: *Dreams That Money Can Buy* (1947), *8×8: Chess Sonata* (1957), and the two-part *Dadascope* completed in 1963. In addition, to these completed projects Richter had several planning sketches and scenarios for films that were never realized due to political or economic circumstances. Amongst these are *Keine Zeit für Tränen* (No Time for Tears, 1933–1934) about the discrimination directed against professional women; *Daily Life* (1934); *Baron Munchhausen* (1937), for which Méliès was supposed to make the sets; *The Role of Women in America* (1941–1942); *The Accident* (1945–1956), about race discrimination; *The Story of the Unicorn* (1945); and *The Minotaur* (1948), based on the Greek myth of Theseus and the Minotaur. What is immediately striking about these projects is that for the most part (*Munchhausen* is an exception), those planned before the war's end have an overt immediate sociopolitical agenda whereas those conceptualized from 1945 onward reference "timeless" Western myths. This recourse to more traditional, universal (albeit Western) genres can be linked conceptually to Richter's earlier belief that abstract forms provided a "universal" visual language for film. In addition, the adaptation of a story that has endured through the millennia attests to a degree of stability that serves to counter the otherwise extreme precariousness of the condition of exile.

While in exile, Richter published a number of books, the most prominent being *Dada Profile* (1961), *Dada, Kunst and Anti-Kunst* (Art and Anti-Art 1964), *Begegnungen von Dada bis Heute* (Encounters from Dada to the Present, 1973), *Kampf um den Film* (The Struggle for Film, 1976), and the autobiographical *Hans Richter by Hans Richter* in 1971. During his later years in the United States, he divided his time between his home in Southbury, Connecticut, and Locarno, Switzerland. Both of these had firmly established communities of artists, many of whom were also exiles. Connecticut was even described at the time as a "Surrealist outpost," and Richter's neighbors included Yves Tanguy, Alexander Calder, the Gorkys, and a constant influx of long-term and repeat visitors such as André Breton and Duchamp.²⁰ To a certain extent, this community paralleled the equally infamous émigré community on the West Coast of the United States, in the Hollywood hills, during World War II. Indeed, the community of exiles in California will serve as an important point of anti-identification for Richter and his cohorts on the East Coast.

Despite his productivity, Richter's post-World War II films are barely mentioned in film history, and when they are it is to dismiss them as "baroque indulgences."²¹ His impact on the filmic avant-garde is thus seen to rest entirely on his early production, and his later works are treated merely as archival curiosities. This perspective is all the more striking when one recalls that in 1947 *Dreams That Money Can Buy*, which had been financed by Peggy Guggenheim and Kenneth McPherson, won the Special Award at the Venice Biennale for "the best original contribution to the progress of cinematography."²² Critic Siegfried Kracauer proclaimed that "[h]e [Richter] transfers for the first time essential forms of modern art to the projection screen. . . . *Dreams that Money Can Buy* confirms the secret dream-life of drawings, paintings, and sculpture. With this film a future collaboration between art and film can begin."²³ And yet, in film and art history it is only the abstract experiments that are recalled and not the later figurative, representational, and narrative-based films. However, to ignore the breadth of Richter's filmic production is to underestimate the artist's keen awareness of the possibilities and limits of the filmic medium, for as we have seen, Richter was also a highly sophisticated film theoretician who wrote several books and essays on the medium.²⁴ And though perhaps on a superficial level Richter's later films are easier for the audience to receive, they are as "experimental," "avant-garde," and ambitious as their precursors in their attempt to push the medium of film to another dimension.

Richter's early films are marked by a conspicuous absence of recognizable characters or actors on screen. In sharp contrast, however, all three films made in the United States rely heavily on easily identifiable personalities and stars. *Dreams That Money Can Buy*, for instance, is divided into seven parts, each scripted by an important artist in the New York exile community. Part one, "Desire" by Max Ernst, is based on the surrealist artist's 1934 novel in the collage, *Une Semaine de Bonté*. The second segment, "The Girl With the Prefabricated Heart," is by Fernand Léger and features references not only to his works in film, such as *Ballet Mécanique* (1924), but also to paintings such as *La Grande Julie* (1945) made by the artist immediately after the war in 1945 in France. Part three, "Ruth, Roses and Revolvers" by Man Ray, is essentially a self-portrait of the artist, and the fourth part, *The Street Without Law*, is by Duchamp. The latter restages Duchamp's infamous *Nude Descending a Staircase* (1913), as well as extended camera shots of his "Chinese Lantern" and "Goldfish" *Rotoreliefs* (1926). Duchamp appears in the film in the character of a New York City policeman.²⁵ Episodes five and six are by Calder and revolve around his signature mobiles. It is interesting to note in this context that of those contributing artists both Léger and Ray had attracted Richter's attention in the 1920s as exemplary in their attempts to advance film in innovative directions. This

construction of an artist collective—many of them exiles themselves—is a significant feature of exilic cinema in which the condition of displacement and alienation serves to bring individuals together united by their relationship to the new host country.²⁶ Richter thereby relinquishes his individual authorship in favor of a position that would be more akin to that of an editor (figure 9.2).



Figure 9.2 Hans Richter, *Dreams that Money Can Buy* (1947). Note fellow émigré Max Ernst on the left. Courtesy of Filmmuseum Berlin—Deutsche Kinemathek.

Richter's role in the highly collaborative *Dreams That Money Can Buy* involved scripting the overarching narrative structure and frame story, which references not only the latter's filmic works but earlier paintings by him such as *Blue Man* of 1917. The ostensible narrative concerns a business venture in which the protagonist "Joe" sets up a pseudo-psychoanalytic practice that allows its patients/clients, for a price, to have their dreams and desires realized. Thus, in the New World even the unconscious can be bought and sold. What unfolds are a series of episodes, each corresponding to the secret fantasies of prospective customers. The role of the unconscious in surrealism is of course central, and on a meta-level *Dreams That Money Can Buy* comments on what happened to that art movement when it comes to the United States as discussed in Angela Miller's contribution to this volume. On another level, the recourse to the unconscious and the realm of dreams as a structuring principle harkens back to Richter's earlier attempts to find a "universal film language"—with the unconscious replacing abstract geometric principles. Further the labile space of the dream world, like that of the myth, and its "universal appeal" serves as a site for identification and a focus around which to gather the disparate group of exile artists for whom stable concepts of culture, practice, or nation have been eradicated. The transition from the world of the office to that of fantasies and dreams becomes a metaphorical journey or crossing that many of these artists had undergone in actuality.

The frame story also directly references Richter's personal current exile status. Joe, who propels the narrative, is a GI who finds himself treated as a foreigner upon his return from the war and as such, he stands in for Richter. Joe asks in the film, "Why do you look at me as if I was a foreigner who spoke a strange language and refuses to assimilate?" And later in an ambiguous statement that could easily refer as well to Richter leaving Europe for exile, Joe proclaims, "the invasion of Holland, May 10, 1940—I had to go and so I did." As Richter muses in his autobiography, "To leave Europe became more and more urgent and this task absorbed all my energies. My patience daily snapping and breaking, daily restored and redressed again, I felt like I was climbing a ladder leading to the sky, rungs disappearing one after the other. Five years later, I filmed such a scene in the last episode of *Dreams That Money Can Buy* without realizing that I was recounting my earlier experiences when leaving Europe."²⁷ Such paranoid scenarios replete with claustrophobic scenes, situations imbued with panic, fear, entrapment, pursuit and escape are all typical of exile cinema.²⁸ Further, the self-reflexive, fragmented, and episodic nature of the film stands in radical opposition to standard Hollywood fare of the time and exists as yet another marker of the displaced status of its various contributors.²⁹ In short, *Dreams That Money Can Buy* tells the story of the dislocated European intelligentsia's perception

of the United States as a place where everything, including the unconscious, had been commodified. It also relates the experiences of a very specific group of avant-garde artists who, having earlier decried the increasing instrumentalization of art, now find themselves geographically located deep within that system.³⁰

IV

Richter gathers a similar cast of Dada and surrealist celebrities ten years later for *8×8 Chess Sonata*, which is divided into eight parts. Former Dadaist Huelsenbeck reminisces in his autobiography, *Memoirs of a Dada Drummer* (1969), that Richter cast him as a knight in Connecticut: "[Richter] said, 'I've got a great part for you. You'll be a knight, and—now you'll be amazed—you're going to lift Matisse's daughter or rather, granddaughter from a tree.'" ³¹ Indeed, Huelsenbeck goes on to recall that he agreed to participate in Richter's film precisely because of the number of art "stars" involved. Richter's last film, *Dadascope* also brings together a similar cast of characters. According to Richter, "*Dadascope* is not conceived of at all as chaos, but as freewheeling poetry; and as such it is in my opinion the best film-making I have done."³² Described by Richter as an "anti-film," *Dadascope* is comprised of a collage of performances by Duchamp, Arp, Tanguy, and Huelsenbeck reading Dada texts—it is above all an anthology of Dada sounds and Dada poems. But there is more to *Dadascope* than verbal poetry, for Richter was also striving to make a visual poetry with images carefully chosen to correspond to the rhythm of the verbal text recalling his earlier visual explorations in *Two Pence: A Commercial in Picture Rhymes*. *Dadascope* replays and restages, as it were, an event nearly half a century in the past—that of Dadaism of the late 1910s. Thus, Richter and his collaborators recreate a historical moment for the camera—this journey into the past and performance of a previous identity is a typical feature of exile cinema. To that extent both *Dreams That Money Can Buy* and *Dadascope* each provide individual vignettes, "capturing" an identity that the artists in question have chosen to represent themselves with for the public. Richter's postimmigration films, in this way, illustrate Naficy's claim that accented films are often a "performance of the author's identity."³³ In this instance, "accent" is taken to its extreme with each grain of the voice producing the Dadaist sounds.

The importance of bringing back-to-life visually and audially a certain moment in history cannot be underestimated, for the significance of the prewar European avant-garde was rapidly being forgotten in the New World. While names such as Man Ray, Duchamp, Arp, Léger, Cocteau, and Ernst resonate with significance today, their art was marginalized in the

United States during the immediate postwar period. Both Dadaism and surrealism had been dismissed as minor art movements by modernist critics such as Clement Greenberg and other supporters of the New York School, who instead championed abstract expressionists such as Jackson Pollock and Willem de Kooning. As Richter notes retrospectively in an interview, the historical avant-garde of the interwar period had all but been forgotten until 1953. Indeed, 1953 marks the advent of what immediately came to be labeled Neo-Dada, practiced by a new generation of artists including Jasper Johns, Rauschenberg, Cy Twombly, and a number of others who were all in one way or another associated with Duchamp's friend, the American composer John Cage. From this perspective, Richter's postwar productions featuring a coterie of Dada and surrealist artists can be seen as attempts to redeem and revitalize crucial moments of the historical avant-garde in the cultural context of what Peter Bürger has termed the "neo-avant-garde."³⁴ The figures mobilized by Richter for these films do not so much self-consciously play roles as they in many ways appear self-referentially as themselves. As Richter explains his choice of cast for *8×8 Chess Sonata*, "I love to work with my old crowd of friends. . . . I prefer to work with people I know rather than professional actors, people to whom I can adapt a role. I work with them in a kind of documentary way."³⁵ Although their works were mostly treated as curiosity pieces, the artists who starred in these films were often featured on the guest lists of prominent New York art world functions, which attest to the considerable cultural capital they commanded. Richter strategically features these characters in his films as documentary material to attract an audience that, once brought into the cinema, would then be encouraged to focus on the meaning of the films.

Needless to say, Richter is not unique in his efforts to construct a history of a period that he witnessed as an active participant. His mining of cultural memory is a characteristic trait of the exile. What is unusual, however, is the number of efforts by former Dadaists to produce a written record of the brief movement. Indeed, already in 1920 Huelsenbeck published "En avant Dada: Eine Geschichte des Dadaismus." The following year in Zurich, Tristan Tzara wrote up a chronology of Dadaism, and in France Louis Aragon outlined the basic principles of the movement. These early memoirs were succeeded by more written histories, penned by Arp, Emmy Ball-Hennings, Ernst, Germaine Everling, George Grosz, and Raoul Hausmann, to mention but a few. Richter contributed to this extensive body of literature with his 1961 *Dada Profile*, which featured portraits made between 1916 and 1920 of former Dadaists together with his accompanying notes and observations. This was followed by his well-known studies, *Dada: Art and Anti-Art* (1964), *Köpfe und Hinterköpfe* (Heads and Foreheads, 1967), *Hans Richter by Hans Richter* (1971), and *Begegnungen von Dada bis Heute*.

Briefe, Dokumente, Erinnerungen (Encounters from Dada to the Presentday: Letters, Documents, Memories, 1973). Two important points should be stressed here, for they are highly revealing of Richter's exilic condition: first, that Richter's historicizing writings all appear in the 1960s after he stops making films, and second, that they were all initially written in German, Richter's native tongue. While these texts are informative and together contribute to our general understanding of Dadaism, their substance or form does not set them apart in any significant way from the vast corpus of writings on the subject. Indeed, Richter's historical reconstruction of Dada and his own identification with it are typical of the condition of exile where identity becomes frozen in a past life and seems to stop in its development and evolution. As Thomas Elsaesser has noted the following in regard to another German émigré and filmmaker, Ernst Lubitsch: "Once arrived in the United States, Lubitsch, along with other 'name' émigrés who came to Hollywood with an international reputation, realized that for the New World, they were representative of the Old World. They found Hollywood hungering for images of a Europe fashioned out of nostalgia, class difference, and romantic fantasy . . . , [and felt] obliged to recreate and imitate a version of the world they had left behind."³⁶ Richter was clearly subject to this pressure to deal with his identity as part of the Old World. But he also faced the additional burden of having to distance himself from other German filmmakers in the United States such as Oskar Fischinger, Fritz Lang, Ernst Lubitsch Otto Preminger, Robert Siodmak, and Billy Wilder, and for whom commercial success was a central issue. Thus, it was Richter's overdetermined significance as a Dadaist that governed the nature of his cultural production after the war. This in part is what led him to his exceptional project of narrating and actually performing cinematographically a history of the avant-garde, and to producing films that radically departed from those being made on the West Coast.

Equally important to Richter's project of reconstituting or at least restaging the European avant-garde was his commitment to exploring the medium of film and devising new strategies of cinematic representation that would challenge the genre of feature narrative. The genre of documentary film becomes particularly significant for Richter during this period. In his seminal 1951 essay *The Film as an Original Art Form* he cites documentary as one of two genres—the other being experimental or art film—capable of challenging dominant commercial cinema.³⁷ However, neither form, by Richter's estimation, goes far enough. Indeed, Richter's postwar film production strives to expand the latter two genres and can best be understood as fusions of these two forms. For though they bear some affinities to the growing body of nonfiction films that focus on art and artists, the form and structure of Richter's later films cannot be said to fall either completely into

the objective truth-based documentary category or into that of the abstract art film.³⁸ Instead, they creatively mix fact and fiction, and blur the distinction between documentary, narrative, and experimental genres. Recall the opening credits of *Dreams That Money Can Buy*: "This is a story of dreams mixed with reality." For Richter, it was this particular brand of filmmaking that seemed most appropriate for the condition of exile that he and others of the Dada and surrealist avant-garde found themselves in during the 1940s. The external, material, physical, and geographical condition of their displacement—the "facts" as it were combined with a highly emotional subjective response that might be marked by paranoias, fantasies, and illusions as well as memories both real and imagined. The genre of the essay that encourages such free play between the poles of representation and does not operate under the pretext of producing either truth or fiction is in many ways the ideal form to be translated into exile film.³⁹

In his study of the cultural production of history, Michel-Rolph Trouillot isolates four important components of the process of historical construction: "1) the moment of fact creation (the making of sources); 2) the moment of fact assembly (the making of *archives*); 3) the moment of fact retrieval (the making of narratives); and 4) the moment of retrospective significance (the making of *history* in the final instance)."⁴⁰ Richter's exile postwar films feature an archival process of this sort, as they attempt to produce a record of a historical avant-garde of an earlier era. Richter's record, however, is performed filmically rather than textually. Indeed, at one point he explicitly observes that film is inherently predisposed to the act of historical preservation: "Even to the sincere lover of the film in its present form it must seem that the film is overwhelmingly used for keeping *records* of creative achievements: of plays, actors, novels, or just plain nature."⁴¹ And just as fictional narratives, memoirs, and autobiographies of the diaspora or migrant often lead writing in new directions and into novel forms, so too Richter pushes nonfiction film toward a new genre—the essay film—in order to produce history.⁴²

In her recent study, *Writing Outside the Nation*, Azade Seyhan observes that "[t]he work of commemoration is often the only means of releasing our (hi)stories from subjugation to official or institutional regimes of forgetting. Remembering is an act of lending coherence and integrity to a history interrupted, divided, or compromised by instances of loss. We engage in history not only as agents and actors but also as narrators and storytellers."⁴³ What needs to be stressed then is the creative act involved in producing and remembering history with subjective interpretations that have conventionally been judged as anathema to the official historical or documentary project. It is important to recall that the German language essay emerges historically during those periods marked by crisis, rupture, and uncertainty, when representation is called into

question. Moreover, Richter's essay films in turn develop during a time of both personal and public crisis functioning as a means by which to commemorate, restore, and re-present a "history interrupted." Both the art film and the documentary would fall short of fulfilling such a mission.

Already in Basel in April 1940, when it was clear that he would have to go into exile from Europe, Richter wrote a short text, "Der Filmessay: Eine neue Form des Dokumentarfilms" (The Film Essay: A New Form of Documentary Film).⁴⁴ In this pioneering article, Richter proposes a new genre of film capable of enabling the filmmaker to make the "invisible" world of thoughts and ideas visible on the screen. Unlike the genre of documentary film that presents facts and information, the essay film produces complex thought that at times is not grounded in *reality* but can be contradictory, irrational, and fantastic. The essay film, according to Richter, no longer binds the filmmaker to the rules and parameters of the traditional documentary practice. Rather, the imagination with all of its artistic potentiality is now to be given free reign. Moreover, Richter explains that he is employing the term "essay" because it signifies a genre in between genres, one that combines documentary with experimental or artistic film. And it is precisely this formal resistance to binary categories and oppositions that is solidified by the process of exile because, according to Naficy, "border consciousness, like exilic liminality, is theoretically against binarism and duality and for a third optique, which is multiperspectival and tolerant of ambiguity, ambivalence, and chaos."⁴⁵ The third optique in this instance becomes a triple fusion of three genres: narrative, documentary, and art, thereby confirming Naficy's theory that "accented films in general derive their power not from purity and refusal but from impurity and refusion."⁴⁶

Richter retrospectively cites his own film *Inflation* (1928) as an early example of what an essay film might look like and several sketches for cinematic projects in the 1930s and early 1940s, such as his *Super Essay Films* (1941), indicate that he has thoroughly conceptualized the genre. However, I argue, he only actualizes the genre with films such as *Dreams That Money Can Buy*, *8×8: Chess Sonata*, and *Dadascope*. For these three works endeavor both to provide a documentary record of an artistic movement and to present a new mode of aesthetic production for these artists. Each is as strongly marked by an attempt to chart the dream world of the unconscious as it is by the exilic condition. Furthermore, they all seek to organize a historical account of the aims and aspirations of Dada and surrealism. Each thereby transforms the conventional notion of the historical document, or of the archive, moving away from the written form into an audiovisual essay. For as Richter notes, "The history of the cinema, like that of society, is split into two divergent lines. As a result, the progressive cinema can no longer be identified simply with the artistic cinema . . . the history

of the progressive cinema is rather that of the European spirit trying to obtain some kind of self-consciousness and hence a tradition of its own in this art too."⁴⁷ Hence, Richter pushes artists such as Duchamp, Léger, and Ernst to think about how to realize their aesthetic production in the medium of film. His later films thus involve not only a geopolitical translation—from a European to an American context—but also the translation of media: from painting and sculpture to film. As such, these films, like his earlier abstract productions, constitute important artistic precedents for the audiovisual essays that have become prevalent in the past decade. Ironically, it took just about as long for this cultural form to enter into dominant practice as it did for Richter's abstract films to have an impact on structuralist avant-garde film of the 1950s and 1960s. As Peter Wollen has put it, "history in the arts" is achieved through "knight's moves."⁴⁸ And it is precisely this type of diagonalizing, not just spatially across oceans and continents, but temporally as well, that culminates in the contemporary essay film.

Although Richter continued to paint until the end of his life, it was in his capacity as a *filmmaker* that he had the greatest impact and influence. This is particularly apparent in his development of the genres of both artistic experimental filmmaking and nonfiction film essays. Moreover, the trajectory of his films provides a glimpse of how the condition of exile fixes and solidifies a carefully and highly self-consciously constructed identity. Yet, in exile his identity was inextricably linked to his prewar career, a form of aesthetic production—Dadaism and surrealism—that was rendered quaint, "minor," by the proponents of the paradigm of modern art championed in the United States at the time. Richter, like other members of the historical avant-garde who escaped to the United States during the rise of fascism in the 1930s and early 1940s, found himself treated as European curiosities whose art was less interesting than his character and personality. As such, his highly innovative work of the postwar period was largely ignored, and his attempt to develop a new mode of filmic production—that of the essay—one that was neither feature, documentary, nor pure art, would not receive its well-deserved recognition until years after his death. It is no small irony that today many experimental filmmakers and visual artists who work in film and video proclaim themselves to be "essayists" leading it to be one of the most popular current genres in contemporary audiovisual production.

Notes

1. Hamid Naficy, *An Accented Cinema: Exilic and Diasporic Filmmaking* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001), 11.
2. *Ibid.*, 12.
3. Cleve Gray, ed., *Hans Richter by Hans Richter* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1971), 48.

4. Richter proclaims, "Today's capitalist film industry produces wares, protects wares and consumes wares. One can demand wares from them but not products with a true worth." He continues, "Film is therefore a commodity good, like boots or beer. As a ware then it must fall under the same production regulations as other wares. Naturally, by characterizing film as a ware or good effects its mode of production. When a boot is made, it is not worth finding a new form for each boot, rather the production can only be worthwhile if it can be produced on a mass scale with variations: yellow, black, green boots with or without buckles or buttons. The same principles apply for film. . . . As a result, film has developed in the direction that minimizes risk to the industry. One calculates according to how the instincts of the masses can be most easily satisfied, with the preconception that the majority of the public has an undeveloped sense of taste and is not ideologically aware. The result then is the excuse that 'the public wants it this way' " (Hans Richter, "Der Film—eine Ware," *Arbeiterbühne und Film*, 4 [April 1931]; rept. in *Hans Richter Film ist Rhythmus*, ed. Ulrich Gregor, special issue of *Kinemathek*, 95 [July 2003]: 69; unless otherwise noted, all translations from the original German are my own).
5. "With sound film, the commodity production of film reaches its zenith. Film is not only standardized according to national and international copyrights, it is monopolized. . . . The development of the film industry as a monopoly parallels the monopolizing developments in all industrial production. Just as oil, steel, and matches control and set prices, so too sound film corporations control and determine the taste and the standard of film consumption" (Richter, "Der Film—eine Ware," 70).
6. "If we do not want to be assimilated into the industry and do not have the intention of being satisfied with the infection of normal films with pretty pictures, then we have nothing to do with usual film production" (Hans Richter, "Der moderne Film," *Filmliga*, 6 [March 1930]; rept. in *Hans Richter Film ist Rhythmus*, 63).
7. Viking Eggeling and Hans Richter, *Universelle Sprache* (Fort in der Lausitz: Eigenverlag, 1920), n.p.
8. Ibid.
9. Hans Richter, "Film . . . ," *De Stijl*, 5 (June 1923); rept. in *Hans Richter Film ist Rhythmus*, 22.
10. For an insightful discussion of the theoretical and serial implications of Richter's work, see Brian O'Doherty, *Hans Richter* (New York: Byron Gallery, 1968).
11. "Der Gegenstand in Bewegung"; rept. in *Hans Richter Film ist Rhythmus*, 43.
12. Hans Richter, *The Struggle for the Film: Towards a Socially Responsible Cinema*, trans. Ben Brewster, ed. Jürgen Römhild (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1986), 24.
13. *Richter on Film*, a filmed interview with Cecile Starr, conducted in Southbury, Connecticut, 1972.
14. Richter, *The Struggle for the Film*, 41.
15. Similarly, in *Ghosts Before Noon*, the objects and the people played equally significant roles as projected forms in motion. In the film's most famous sequence, Richter playfully has four bowler hats take on an uncanny life of their own.
16. Hans Richter, "Film von morgen"; rept. in *Hans Richter Film ist Rhythmus*, 56.

17. Richter, *The Struggle for the Film*, 41.
18. It should be noted that as recently as 2003 Jonas Mekas paid tribute to Richter with his nine-minute *A Visit to Hans Richter*.
19. See Peter Wollen, "The Two Avant-Gardes," *Readings and Writings: Semiotic Counter-Strategies* (New York: Verso, 1982), 92–104.
20. For a discussion of this community, see Martica Sawin, *Surrealism in Exile and the Beginning of the New York School* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1995), 176.
21. As A. L. Rees notes, Richter's later films, "such as *Dreams that Money can Buy* (1944–7)—were long undervalued as baroque indulgences . . . by contrast to the more 'materialist' abstract films of the twenties" (*The Oxford History of World Cinema: The Definitive History of Cinema Worldwide*, ed. Geoffrey Nowell-Smith [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996], 104).
22. For a historical overview of the film, see Stephanie Casal and Pia Lanziger, "Dreams That Money Can Buy," *Hans Richter: Malerei und Film*, ed. Hilmar Hoffman and Walter Schobert (Frankfurt A. M.: Pippert & Koch, 1989), 104–111.
23. Siegfried Kracauer, "Kunst und Film. Zu Hans Richter: Träume für Geld," *Neue Züricher Zeitung*, January 25, 1948; rept. in *Hans Richter Film ist Rhythmus*, 126.
24. Including *The Struggle for Film* in 1939, first published in 1976.
25. It is important here to recall the MoMA screening of 1941 in which Richter's *Rhythmus 21* was shown with films by Man Ray, Léger, and Duchamp.
26. As Naficy observes, these groups "signify and signify upon exile and diaspora by expressing, allegorizing, commenting upon, and critiquing the home and host societies and cultures and the deterritorialized conditions of the filmmakers. They signify and signify upon cinematic traditions by means of their artisanal and collective production modes, their aesthetics and politics of smallness and imperfection, and their narrative strategies that cross generic boundaries and undermine cinematic realism" (Naficy, *An Accented Cinema*, 4–5).
27. *Hans Richter by Hans Richter*, 48.
28. According to Naficy, "[T]he spatial aspects of the closed form in the mis-en-scène consist of interior locations and closed settings, such as prisons and tight living quarters, a dark lighting scheme that creates a mood of constriction and claustrophobia, and characters who are restricted in their movements and perspective by spatial, bodily or other barriers. . . . The closed temporal form is driven by panic and fear narratives, in essence, a form of temporal claustrophobia, in which the plot centers on pursuit, entrapment, and escape" (Naficy, *An Accented Cinema*, 153).
29. Overall Naficy concludes that films produced in exile are "fragmented, multi-lingual, epistolary, self-reflexive, and critically juxtaposed narrative structure; amphibolic, doubled, crossed, and lost characters; subject matter and themes that involve journeying, historicity, identity, and displacement; dysphoric, euphoric, nostalgic, synaesthetic, liminal, and politicized structures of feeling; interstitial and collective modes of production; and inscription of the biographical, social, and cinematic (dis)location of the filmmakers" (Naficy, *An Accented Cinema*, 4).

30. A never fully realized semiautobiographical film project (1948–1952) immediately following *Dreams* was based on the myth of Theseus trapped in the maze with the Minotaur.
31. Richard Huelsenbeck, *Memoirs of a Dada Drummer*, trans. Joachim Neugroschel, ed. Hans J. Kleinschmidt (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991), 109.
32. *Hans Richter by Hans Richter*, 148.
33. Naficy, *An Accented Cinema*, 6.
34. See Peter Bürger, *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, trans. Michael Shaw (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984).
35. *Hans Richter by Hans Richter*, 54.
36. Thomas Elsaesser, *Weimar Cinema and After: Germany's Historical Imaginary* (New York: Routledge, 2000), 372.
37. "The fact is that there are at least two film forms besides the fictional film that, less spectacular than Hollywood, are more cinematographic in the proper sense of the word," the documentary form and the experimental or art film (Hans Richter, "The Film as an Original Art Form," *Film Culture Reader*, ed. P. Adams Sitney [New York: Praeger Publishers, 1970], 17).
38. For an overview of these films, see Richard M. Barsam, *Nonfiction Film: A Critical History* (Bloomington: Indiana University, 1992), especially chapter 6.
39. Indeed, many of the filmmakers that Naficy has grouped together under the term "accented cinema" are film essayists.
40. Michel-Rolph Trouillet, *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1995), 27.
41. Richter, "Film as an Original Art Form," 16.
42. As Azade Seyhan astutely observes, "Writers of diasporas often employ linguistic forms of loss or dislocation, such as fragments or elliptical recollections of ancestral languages, cross-lingual idioms, and mixed codes to create new definitions of community and community memory in exile" (Azade Seyhan, *Writing Outside the Nation* [Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001], 17).
43. *Ibid.*, 4.
44. Hans Richter, "Der Filmessay: Eine neue Form des Dokumentarfilms," *Schreiben Bilder Sprechen: Texte zum essayistischen Film*, ed. Christa Blümlinger and Constantin Wulff (Vienna: Sonderzahl, 1992), 195–198.
45. *Ibid.*, 31.
46. Naficy, *An Accented Cinema*, 6.
47. Richter, *The Struggle for Film*, 29.
48. Wollen, "Two Avant-Gardes," 104.